

PRACTICES FOR ENHANCING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PREVENTING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

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Ms. TALBOT'S PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM IS A FUN PLACE TO BE. THE CHILDREN ARE WORKING ON A PROJECT ABOUT WATER AND ARE VERY EXCITED ABOUT IT. Ms. TALBOT HAS LOTS OF GREAT ACTIVITIES PLANNED. HOWEVER, SHE HAS 17 CHILDREN IN THE CLASSROOM AND IN HER WORDS "THERE ARE LOTS OF CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS." IT SEEMS LIKE CHILDREN ARE ALWAYS TAKING THINGS AWAY FROM EACH OTHER, CRYING, LEAVING GROUP ACTIVITIES, AND "HAVING A FIT" WHEN IT COMES TIME TO CHANGE ACTIVITIES. Ms. TALBOT IS SO FRUSTRATED SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.

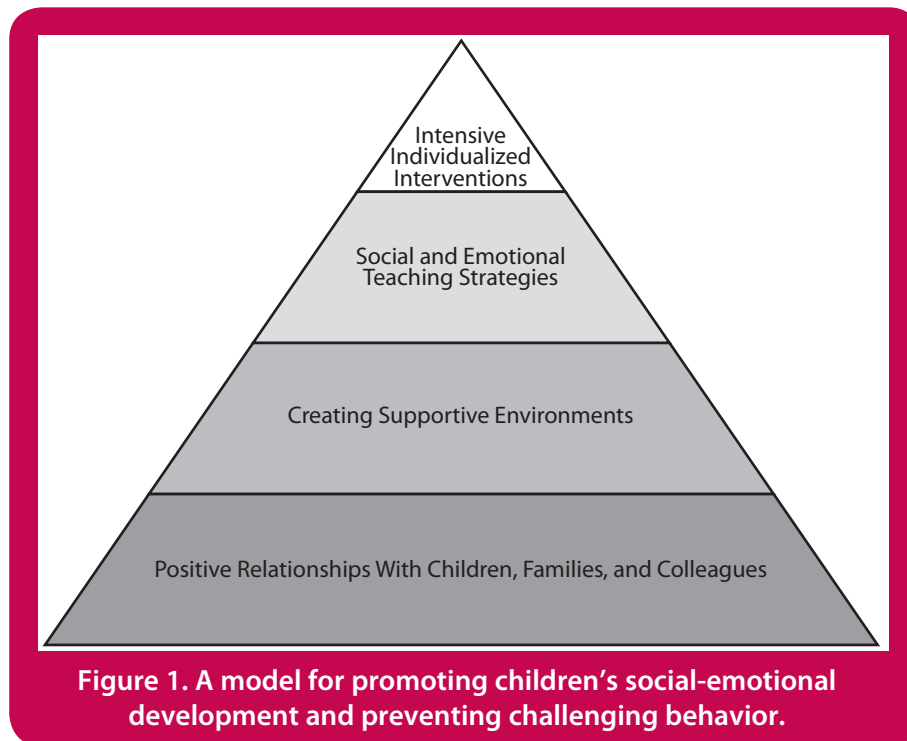


Figure 1. A model for promoting children's social-emotional development and preventing challenging behavior.

If you have ever worked in a preschool setting, this story probably sounds familiar. The behaviors described above are frustrating to teachers and can disrupt the ongoing routine of the classroom. When teachers are in these situations, they are often anxious to find strategies that they can use to “deal with” specific challenging behaviors. Importantly, many challenging behaviors can be prevented by designing environments that promote children’s engagement and teaching children new social skills (Lawry, Danko, & Strain, 1999; Neilsen, Olive, Donovan, & McEvoy, 1999; Strain & Hemmeter, 1999). Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain (2003) have described a framework for promoting children’s social-emotional development and preventing and addressing children’s challenging behavior. This framework is represented in the teaching pyramid (see Figure 1) and includes effective practices that are designed to promote children’s social skills and emotional development, provide support for

children’s appropriate behavior, and address challenging behaviors. The four levels of practice are designed to promote the social-emotional development and behavior of all children including those with ongoing, persistent by challenging behavior.

Importance of Relationships

As the pyramid depicts, the foundation of this model is grounded in the context of positive, supportive relationships between teachers and children, as well as with families and other professionals. These relationships are essential to implementing effective practices to support children’s social-emotional development. These relationships do not come automatically but are instead built over a period of time through respectful, reciprocal, and responsive interactions.

To have respectful relationships, early care providers must acknowledge the range and validity of diverse

perspectives. Oftentimes this means embracing the tension that arises when different perspectives exist. To develop reciprocal relationships, early care providers must establish interactions that allow for equal voice for all perspectives. Additionally, for relationships to be reciprocal and responsive, adults must be willing to examine their personal, family, and cultural views of challenging child behavior. Specifically, early care providers must examine their personal beliefs regarding the acceptability and unacceptability of specific types of child behavior, consider personal beliefs regarding the causes of specific types of unacceptable child behavior, and acknowledge contrasting or conflicting beliefs held by others regarding acceptable and unacceptable types of child behavior based on deeply held cultural beliefs.

Creating Supportive Environments

When children know what is expected of them, what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, they are less likely to engage in challenging behavior. In general, children’s challenging behaviors often result from boredom, frustration, anxiety, or confusion. For young gifted children, challenging behavior may also result from perfectionism, limited stimulation, and difficulty finding peers with similar interests. Classroom environments, both physical and social, can be designed to minimize these kinds of feelings and increase the likelihood that children will be engaged in meaningful activities. For example, teachers can increase the likelihood that children will be engaged in meaningful ways if the materials and activities are designed and selected based on the

children's unique interests, ability levels, and backgrounds.

Creating supportive environments involves implementing practices that promote children's engagement, help children understand expectations and routines, and reduce the likelihood that challenging behavior will occur. These practices relate to the physical design of the environment including schedules, routines, and transitions; adaptations and modifications; class rules; and teacher behaviors. Although many of these practices are generic in nature, they play a crucial role in preventing challenging behavior.

A key aspect of creating supportive environments is teaching children the expectations of the environment. For preschool children, the expectations of the preschool classroom are likely to differ in a variety of ways from expectations experienced at home or in other settings. Children cannot be expected to understand the new routines or expectations of the preschool environment unless those expectations are taught and reinforced in ways that are meaningful to each child. Teachers should consider children's different experiences outside the classroom and teach expectations in ways that are sensitive to these different experiences. Teachers should also work with parents to explain the expectations of the classroom and to discuss issues related to differences in school and home expectations.

Social-Emotional Teaching Strategies

Promoting children's social-emotional development requires a comprehensive approach that includes creating a social context, teaching social skills, and facilitating children's emotional development. Creating a caring, socially rich, cooperative, and responsive class-

room does not happen without planning; it requires a deliberate approach on the part of the teaching staff. The social environment of the classroom provides the context for children to develop the social skills and emotional foundations that they will need to be successful in school and life.

Important goals related to children's social-emotional development include initiating and maintaining relationships with others, resolving conflicts, making friends, and communicating feelings, emotions, and needs in appropriate and effective ways. Viewing social competence from this perspective suggests a broader set of goals than is typically addressed in preschool classrooms. Specifically, skills that should be taught can be grouped into three categories: (a) friendship skills; (b) emotional regulation and empathy (e.g., recognizing, responding to, and expressing emotions, self-regulation); and (c) problem solving.

Research on social-emotional teaching strategies and curricula has resulted in a set of strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective in teaching social skills to young children. Generally, these strategies include: describing, modeling, rehearsing, role-playing, prompting children in naturalistic contexts, and reinforcing and acknowledging the skill when it occurs. It is important that children learn the concept (e.g., teaching children during morning meeting about what it means to be a friend), practice the skill (e.g., during snack, center, and other times when children need a friend), and have opportunities to view and talk about examples and nonexamples of the skill (e.g., during group or individual discussions with the teacher). Large- and small-group activities provide a useful context for introducing the concept, modeling the skill, and role-playing. Puppets,

books, songs, and games can be used to explain the concept to children in a way that they are likely to understand. Using several different types of activities and strategies throughout the day will increase the likelihood that all children will begin to grasp these concepts. Center time and outdoor play, as well as other child-directed activities, provide an important context for children to practice the skill and get feedback about the skill from teachers and peers. Concrete examples and ample opportunities to practice the skill will be critical to children learning the skill.

Intensive Individualized Interventions

Intensive individualized interventions are used when children continue to have challenging behavior despite efforts to develop a positive relationship with the child, build relationships with families, use classroom preventive practices, and teach social skills (Fox et al., 2003). This approach uses the science of Positive Behavior Support (PBS) to develop a behavior support plan that may be used within the classroom and home environment. The description of this approach as intensive and individualized refers to the use of a process that requires teaming among classroom staff and family members to design an intervention plan that is based on understanding of the individual child, the environmental factors that relate to the child's problem behavior, and the child's strengths and needs.

The PBS process begins by developing a team that includes both family members and classroom personnel. Family participation can be promoted and encouraged by meeting in the environment where the family will feel most comfortable, ensuring trans-

lation services so that the family can actively participate, meeting at times that are convenient for the family, and approaching the family with a sincere expression of concern rather than blame for the child's problem behavior (Dunlap & Fox, 1996). The first task of the team is to determine the events, circumstances, and interactions that trigger and maintain problem behavior through functional assessment. The family perspective is vitally important here because family members will have information about the child that school personnel may not. For example, a parent may be able to share that days when his child is easily frustrated and explosive seem to correspond with the child complaining of an ear ache or sore throat in the morning before going to school.

The functional assessment process culminates in the development of a behavior support plan. This plan includes strategies for preventing the behavior, skills that will be taught to the child, and strategies to ensure that the problem behavior is not maintained. Ideally, a behavior support plan should be developed that will address problem behavior in the classroom and at home (if it is occurring in both environments). The development of a plan that will be used by the family in the home and community is best developed with the family member as an active participant.

PBS is a process that was designed to be responsive to family needs, preferences, strengths, and values. The success of the process will rest on the adults' ability to team well together and to develop a behavior support plan that is both relevant for the family (i.e., respectful of family values and beliefs, a match to family need) and effective for the child.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all of the practices across the pyramid in detail, in

the following section some additional teaching tips are presented that correspond to the levels of the pyramid and which, when implemented consistently and effectively, are likely to result in fewer problem behaviors.

Build Positive Relationships With Every Child Every Day

Relationships between adults and children provide a supportive context for teaching new skills, as well as addressing problem behavior. Support and attention from adults is very important to children. Unfortunately, some children who engage in problem behaviors are more likely to have interactions with adults that are directive or focused on their problem behavior rather than interactions that provide positive feedback for appropriate behavior and support for learning new skills. Engaging in positive interactions with children that are focused on teaching new skills and supporting children's appropriate behavior is important for building relationships in which children feel safe and are supported to try new things, persist at difficult tasks, and ask for help when they need it. Although this is easy to do with some children, it is more difficult to do with children who engage in ongoing problem behavior. The goal is to try to have a positive, supportive interaction with every child every day. This may take the form of guiding a child through a social problem, providing positive feedback about something the child has done well, or engaging in a conversation with the child about something in which the child is interested.

Build Meaningful Partnerships With Families

Effective early childhood education is built on meaningful relationships

between early care providers and families. These relationships do not come instantly but are instead built over a period of time with mutual trust and respect serving as the foundation (Barrera, Corso, & Macpherson, 2003). It is critical to build these relationships with all families so that the relationship is established prior to having to address problem behavior. These relationships can provide a context for sharing strategies with families about promoting their children's social skills and emotional development. It is also in the context of these relationships that teachers can learn about the child's interests, needs, and abilities. Importantly, these positive relationships between families and professionals provide a supportive context in which to address problem behavior when it occurs.

Structure Routines, Transitions, and Activities

Children often engage in problem behavior when they don't know what to do or how to do it. Further, many challenging behaviors occur when children are waiting with nothing to do. A key strategy for preventing challenging behavior relates to the design and implementation of the schedule (Lawry et al., 1999; Strain & Hemmeter, 1999). There are three key factors. First, the schedule should be implemented consistently in order to help children know what to do. When the schedule changes from day to day, it is difficult for children to learn the routine. Second, minimize the number of transitions in which children spend time waiting with nothing to do. This can be accomplished by minimizing large-group transitions. For example, rather than having a transition to and from a group snack time, a snack can be an activity during center time in which children are

allowed to participate as they choose. Transitions can also be structured so that children have something to do, such as a story, song, or game, while they are waiting for other children to complete the transition. Third, children should be taught the classroom routines and expectations. Although some children will learn the routines and expectations simply by participating in them, other children will need to be taught in more individualized ways. Picture schedules, peer buddies, and teacher assistance can be used to teach routines and expectations.

Create Activities That Are Fun and Engaging

Engagement is key to preventing challenging behavior (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003). When children are engaged in an activity they enjoy, they are less likely to engage in problem behavior. It is important to realize that not all children enjoy the same activities or can participate in the same activities in the same way. Activities should be structured such that children of differing ability levels can participate. Some children may benefit from assistance from an adult when learning a new activity, and other children may benefit from a set of pictures that demonstrates how to participate in an activity (Sandall et al., 2002).

Teach With Intention

Children who are able to communicate their emotions appropriately, who can solve social problems, and who have positive social interaction skills are less likely to engage in problem behavior. A critical step in preventing problem behavior is teaching these types of skills in a systematic, intentional way that includes teaching the

concept, talking about examples and nonexamples, supporting children's use of the skills in naturally occurring contexts, and reviewing children's use of the skills (Webster-Stratton, 1999). The following vignette provides an example of how to intentionally teach a social skill.

In order to teach the children how to help each other, Ms. Talbot presents the concept during circle time using a book about helping other children. After she reads the story, she asks the children to identify some times when they have needed help or when they have helped someone else. She then reminds them to help each other throughout the day. During center time, Libby asks the teacher for help in the block area. Ms. Talbot prompts her to ask her friends for help. Libby goes back to the block area and asks Sam to help her. Sam helps her with the block structure and Ms. Talbot comments, "Wow, you guys worked together to build a big castle!" At the end of the day during group time, Ms. Talbot reminds them about the importance of helping each other and asks if anyone helped someone else or had someone help them. Jacob raises his hand and says, "Luke couldn't get the water on when he was washing his hands so I helped him turn on the water." Ms. Talbot acknowledges Jacob and asks other children for examples. Helping each other will be discussed for several days until all of the children understand the concept and are consistently helping each other when they need help.

Teaching children how to be good friends, how to be good problem solvers, and how to communicate their emotions can be fun. There are many creative ways to teach these skills including games, puppets, children's literature, and social stories (Joseph & Strain, 2003). Teaching social skills in a fun and engaging way is key to preventing problem behavior.

Model and Acknowledge Appropriate Social Behavior

Adult attention and feedback are important tools in promoting children's social skills and emotional development (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003; Webster-Stratton, 1999). Adult attention and feedback can be used to guide children through difficult social problems, model appropriate ways to communicate difficult emotions, demonstrate strategies for dealing with peers, and confirm with children that their behavior is appropriate. When working with children with challenging behavior, it is easy to get caught up in dealing with the problem behavior rather than giving the child time and attention for positive behavior. Teachers should attempt to focus on acknowledging children when they are engaging in appropriate behavior and modeling appropriate ways to respond when one is happy, frustrated, mad, or sad (Lawry et al., 1999).

Pay Attention to the Function of the Child's Behavior

Many children engage in problem behavior because they do not have the social skills or language skills to engage in more appropriate behavior. When this is the case, an effective way to address the problem is to teach the child a new skill they can use in place

of the problem behavior. The following vignette provides an example.

Jesse frequently hits, scratches, or screams at other children during center time. Ms. Talbot is frustrated and does not understand why Jesse is always “acting out.” However, after a systematic observation of Jesse, Ms. Talbot determines that Jesse engages in these behaviors when he wants to enter into a play situation because he doesn’t know how to ask others to play. Knowing that he wants to enter the play situation, Ms. Talbot can now focus on teaching him these skills.

Knowing the function of the child’s behavior is critical to identifying a strategy for addressing it (Neilsen et al., 1999). Children’s behavior typically serves the purpose of getting something (e.g., toy, attention) or avoiding something (e.g., an activity they don’t like, a child they don’t want to play with). Strategies for addressing the problem behavior are more likely to be effective when the strategy is focused on the purpose of the child’s behavior. A behavior support plan can then be developed that focuses on preventing the problem behavior, teaching new skills, and responding to the behavior in a way that supports the use of the new skills rather than the problem behavior (Dunlap & Fox, 1996).

Summary

As the teaching pyramid depicts, promoting children’s social and emotional growth is grounded in the context of positive, supportive relationships between teachers and children, as well as with families and other professionals. Because children’s

challenging behaviors are often associated with boredom, frustration, anxiety, or confusion, early care providers must work to ensure children know what is expected of them, what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. Classroom environments can be designed to minimize feelings of frustration and increase the likelihood that children will be engaged in fun and meaningful activities. The term *creating supportive environments* is used to refer to practices that promote children’s engagement and help children understand expectations and routines. When environments are fun and engaging, children are less likely to engage in problem behavior. Creating a caring, cooperative, and responsive classroom does not happen automatically. Teachers must have a planful approach and be intentional in the strategies they choose. Finally, in order to be effective at addressing persistent problem behavior, teachers must identify the function of the child’s behavior and develop an intervention plan that is matched to the purpose of the behavior. Implementing the practices associated with a single level of the pyramid is not likely to be effective for addressing the range of problem behavior found in most early childhood classrooms; rather it is the comprehensive, intentional implementation of all levels of the pyramid that is needed to be effective at addressing problem behavior. **GCT**

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